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ABSTRACT

Two dimensions of the definition of idiom (the semantic and the structural) that may be relevant to the foreign language learner language learner are abstracted from non-specialist dictionary definitions of the term "idiom." The structural dimension is further subdivided into two aspects: place in a structural hierarchy, and degree of stereotyping. Linguistic definitions of "idiom" by C.F. Hockett, Adam Makkai and John Lyons are discussed with respect to the dimesions abstracted from lay definitions. A matrix is proposed for idioms and related expressions along the dimensions of structural complexity and semantic complexity. The paper concludes with a brief discussion of implications of the matrix for foreign language learners and teachers. (JB)

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What is an Idiom? : an Applied Linguistic Approach

1. In this article an attempt is made to approach the question "What is an Idiom" in two different but, it is hoped, complementary ways. The first way is to look at the problem of idioms from what might be called a "consumer's" point of view, that is the point of view of someone who is not a student of Language as such, but perhaps a student of a language (I am thinking in particular of the learner of English as a Foreign Language). The second way is to look briefly at what some linguists have to say on the subject of defining an idiom.

2. Let us begin, then, by looking at some, as it were, non-technical or non-specialist definitions as found in a few dictionaries which are widely used by learners and others. This should give us an idea of the "everyday" or "layman" sense in which the work idiom is used. The four dictionaries I have chosen are The Concise Oxford Dictionary (1976), Chambers Twentieth Century Dictionary (1972), The Advanced Learner's Dictionary (3rd ed. 1974) and the Random House Dictionary (1967). Idiom is, of course, given several definitions in each of these works, but the definitions which are closest to the kind of meaning we have in mind are:

Definition 1: "peculiarity of phraseology approved by usage through having meaning not deducible from the separate words." (Concise Oxford)

Definition 2: "an expression characteristic of a particular language not logically or grammatically explicable." (Chambers)

Definition 3: "succession of words whose meaning is not obvious through knowledge of the individual meanings of the constituent words but must be learnt as a whole (examples)." (Advanced Learner's)

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Definition 4: "an expression whose meaning is not predictable from the meaning of its constituent elements (examples) or from the grammatical rules of a language (example), and which is not a constituent of a larger expression of like characteristics." (Random House)

3. We notice that all four emphasise the difficulty of inferring the meaning of an idiom from the meanings of the words which go to make it up. In addition, two of the definitions (definitions 2 and 4) mention some kind of grammatical peculiarity attached to the idiom. We can therefore distinguish two dimensions to the idiom which may be relevant to the needs of the foreign learner:

(1) the dimension of meaning - the semantic dimension

(2) the structural dimension

4. The semantic dimension: We have seen that one way of looking at an idiom is to regard it as an expression which is not explicable in terms of the meaning of its constituent parts. A rather extreme form of this definition would be the argument put forward by Hockett in A Course in Modern Linguistics (1958) [1]

"Let us use momentarily the term 'Y' for any grammatical form, the meaning of which is not deducible from its structure. Any Y, in an occurence of which it is not a constituent of a larger Y, is an idiom."

5. Hockett proceeds to follow through and accept the implication of this definition which is that every isolated morpheme is an idiom. (A morpheme is, by definition, an irreducible grammatical unit. Its meaning, therefore, cannot be deduced from its structure, since it has no structure, and it must be a 'Y' in Hockett's terms. It follows that

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1. Quoted by Makkai (1969)

words which are not reducible to constituent morphemes - such as look, chair, see, it etc - are also idioms). Hockett is, of course, entitled to define his technical terms in any way that seems appropriate; but to define such language items as chair and it as idioms obviously runs counter to the generally accepted idea of an idiom as some kind of complex expression, as we have seen from the dictionary definitions already quoted.

6. It might seem preferable, therefore, rather to follow Makkai [1] when he partially defines an idiom as "a linguistic form whose meaning is unclear in spite of the familiar elements it contains." (my italics) Thus, a single morpheme word (such as look, chair and the other examples quoted above) would not qualify as idioms since they do not contain other elements. Also, an expression such as "the green chair" would not qualify as an idiom since the meanings of the "familiar elements" (the + green + chair) combine to give a predictable "clear" meaning.

7. Examples of expressions which Makkai cites as qualifying as idioms by his definition are: blackmail, man-of-war (= ship/bird/fish), look up to (= admire) and Don't count your chickens before they're hatched. Each of these is able to be (in Makkai's phrase) "erroneously decoded": in other words, the familiar elements combine in a way which does not give a predictable meaning. (We may note here, for future reference, that the structures of the examples given above include a compound noun, a hyphenated compound noun, a verb phrase, and a (proverbial) sentence. We may also note that, by implication, Makkai puts the upper structural limit of an idiom at sentence level.)

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1. Makkai (1969, p. 44. For a more complete statement of Makkai's position see Makkai (1972)

8. The definition as it stands is obviously too general since it would include novel literary expressions, private language (i.e. where words are used in a certain sense by a small group of people), humourous language, etc. Makkai therefore goes on to say that the expressions must be "institutionalised" and "recognised wherever English is spoken". By "institutionalised" Makkai presumably means that the phrase is a stereotyped phrase which is recognised as such by competent speakers. There must also be general agreement on the meaning of the idiomatic word or phrase.

9. Makkai also has a category of what he calls "pseudo-idioms". These are expressions in which one of the elements does not make any sense at all on its own. An example would be spic and span (= clean and tidy). Whereas and span are morphemes with their own meanings, spic does not exist in Standard English outside this expression. (Etymologically it is related to spike and originally referred to a spike that had been newly cut (span was a chip of wood that had been newly split); a rather rare variant spick meaning a "nail" or "spike" exists; sometimes the expression is written spick and span, in which case it might perhaps no longer be a "pseudo-idiom" in Makkai's terms, as we shall see.) Makkai argues that expressions like spic and span which contain an element or elements which do not exist elsewhere in the language "are not true idioms because they cannot really mislead you: all they can do is lead you up a blind alley." (ibid., p. 51). In other words, there is no plausible literal meaning to be taken from the whole expression. This is in contrast to an expression like undergo (= suffer), which Makkai classifies as an idiom, presumable because the constituent morphemes might be interpreted as under = "beneath" and go = "move", giving a literal meaning of "move beneath".

10. A variant of the pseudo-idiom is where none or only one of the constituent morphemes occurs as a free word elsewhere as in, for example, preoccupied, compassion, impunity. To take the last example first, impunity might conceivably be divided into two morphemes im + punity: neither of these exists as a word elsewhere. Without goirg into detailed morphemic analysis, we can see that in the case of preoccupied and compassion only one constituent in each case is a free word elsewhere. Makkai calls such expressions "part idioms".

11. Generally speaking, therefore, we could say that Makkai's definition of idiom corresponds more closely than Hockett's does to the generally accepted or non-specialist interpretation of the term, as revealed in our dictionary quotations. This is mainly because Makkai excludes single morpheme items from the category of idiom.

12. Nevertheless, there are still two significant ways in which Makkai's definition varies from the dictionary definitions we have quoted. The first difference is expressed most clearly in The Advanced Learner's and Concise Oxford definitions, although it might be inferred from the others. The Advanced Learner's definition refers to a "succession of words" and the Concise Oxford refers to "separate words". We have seen that according to Makkai's definition, such compounds as blackmail and undergo would be classified as idioms. It is unlikely, however, that most learners would normally regard them as such. The reason is fairly obvious: both teachers and learners (and indeed most people) tend to think of an idiom as a grammatical and semantic unit occurring above word level.

13. This is, of course, in some respects an arbitrary categorisation since whether a certain expression is to be written as two words or one compound word can be a matter of variant usage. Usually hyphens are used

to show that two (or more) words are to be assigned to the same word-class, and not to their usual word-classes: thus in never-to-be-forgotten, various disparate elements combine to form one adjective. But sometimes decisions as to whether a given compound should be written as one word, or as a hyphenated word, or as two words, might depend on certain more-or-less arbitrary "house-rules". Nevertheless, the fact remains that whereas most learners and teachers would regard, say, blackmail as simply a new word to be learned, they would tend to regard expressions like black market and black sheep (= disgrace to the family) as idioms. (In speech this distinction is usually pointed up by characteristic stress patterns: blackmail as opposed to black sheep.) [1]

14. The second way in which Makkai's definition of idiom differs from the way in which the word may be understood is indicated by the Chambers and Random House definitions. The Chambers dictionary, for example, defines an idiom as "an expression .... not .... grammatically explicable." This leads us to the second main dimension of the definition of idiom.

15. The Structural Dimension: If we assume (with The Advanced Learner's Dictionary) that an idiom consists of a "succession of words", then these words must have some kind of structure; and the definition quoted at the end of the last section implies that there may be something unusual or unpredictable about the structure of idioms.

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1. For different reasons Andras Balint (Balint, 1969) rejects compounds as idioms. This point of view is refuted by Makkai (1972), p. 45. One feels that the force of the argument is with Makkai. It is difficult to see, in linguistic terms, how one can make a consistent differentiation between polylexemic stereotypes and polymorphemic compounds. I would argue, however, that it is possible to do so on ad hoc grounds: see below, paras. 26 et seq.

16. Although he does not attempt to define the term idiom as such, Lyons (1969) touches upon this aspect of it when he deals with what he calls 'ready made' utterances and schemata.[1] Lyons's examples of ready made utterances are the expressions How do you do? and Rest in peace. These expressions are "unanalysable" and "situationally bound." Other examples which he gives are proverbial expressions, such Easy come, easy go and All that glisters is not gold. The discussion of ready-made utterances occurs in Lyons' book in a section dealing with the sentence. We note also that these examples given are at sentence level and that therefore, structurally, ready made utterances are sentences. (This excludes longer stereotyped utterances such as might occur, for example, in a religious ceremony.) The schemata, on the other hand, are not complete expressions. They are "grammatically unstructured" or "only partially structured" but can still be combined in sentences according to productive rules. His examples are: What's the use of --ing?, Down with -- , and for --'s sake. The first two are sentence-schemata; the last one is a phrase-schemata.

17. At this point it may be useful to disentangle two aspects of what we have called the structural dimension. The first one is the aspect of the place of an idiom in a structural hierarchy; the second aspect is the degree of stereotyping characteristic of any given idiom.

18. The aspect of the structural hierarchy of idioms is relatively straightforward. We have already implied that the idea of a mono-morphemic idiom is of little use or relevance to language teaching. Our hierarchy of idioms will therefore start at compound word level (possibly) and end at sentence level.

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1. Lyons (1968) pp 177-178. The expression 'ready-made' utterances is a translation from de Saussure: "locutions toutes faites."

19. We are still left with several kinds of choice and emphasis which are summarised in figure 1. In this figure I have tried to locate stereotyped expressions above morpheme level along two axes: the vertical axis of the place of the idiom in terms of a structural hierarchy, and the horizontal axis in terms of "decodability", going from expressions which are easily decoded or understood from their constituent parts ("transparent") to that which are liable to "erroneous decoding" or not codable (Makkai's "pseudo idioms" or "partial idioms"). The factor which is common to all of these is some degree of stereotyping.

20. There are, of course, no hard and fast divisions of the vast amount of language data which falls within the area indicated in figure 1. In terms of the structural hierarchy, we have already mentioned the blurred edge between "word" and "phrase", especially in terms of compound words such as (for example) head-teacher, which some might write head teacher, etc. Similarly, in terms of surface structure, the distinction between phrase and sentence will depend on the context. In some contexts, a given group of words will be printed as a sentence. In another context, the same group of words might be part of a sentence.

21. Similarly, it would be rash to categorise all utterances as falling into the categories of either equally transparent or equally opaque. Thus, while both It was a case of the blind leading the blind and It was a blind alley (job) are both "opaque", it seems to me that the latter is less decodable from the literal meanings than the former, although, of course, it would be difficult to prove this.

22. Nevertheless, it will be seen from figure 1 that, in order to simplify the discussion, I have divided the total area into four main divisions. The cut along the axis of structural hierarchy has been made

between compound words (whether hyphenated or not) on the one hand and expressions consisting of more than one word on the other. The cut along the axis of decodability has been made between expressions which are decodable from the literal meaning of their component parts (labelled "transparent") and those expressions not so decodable (labelled "opaque").

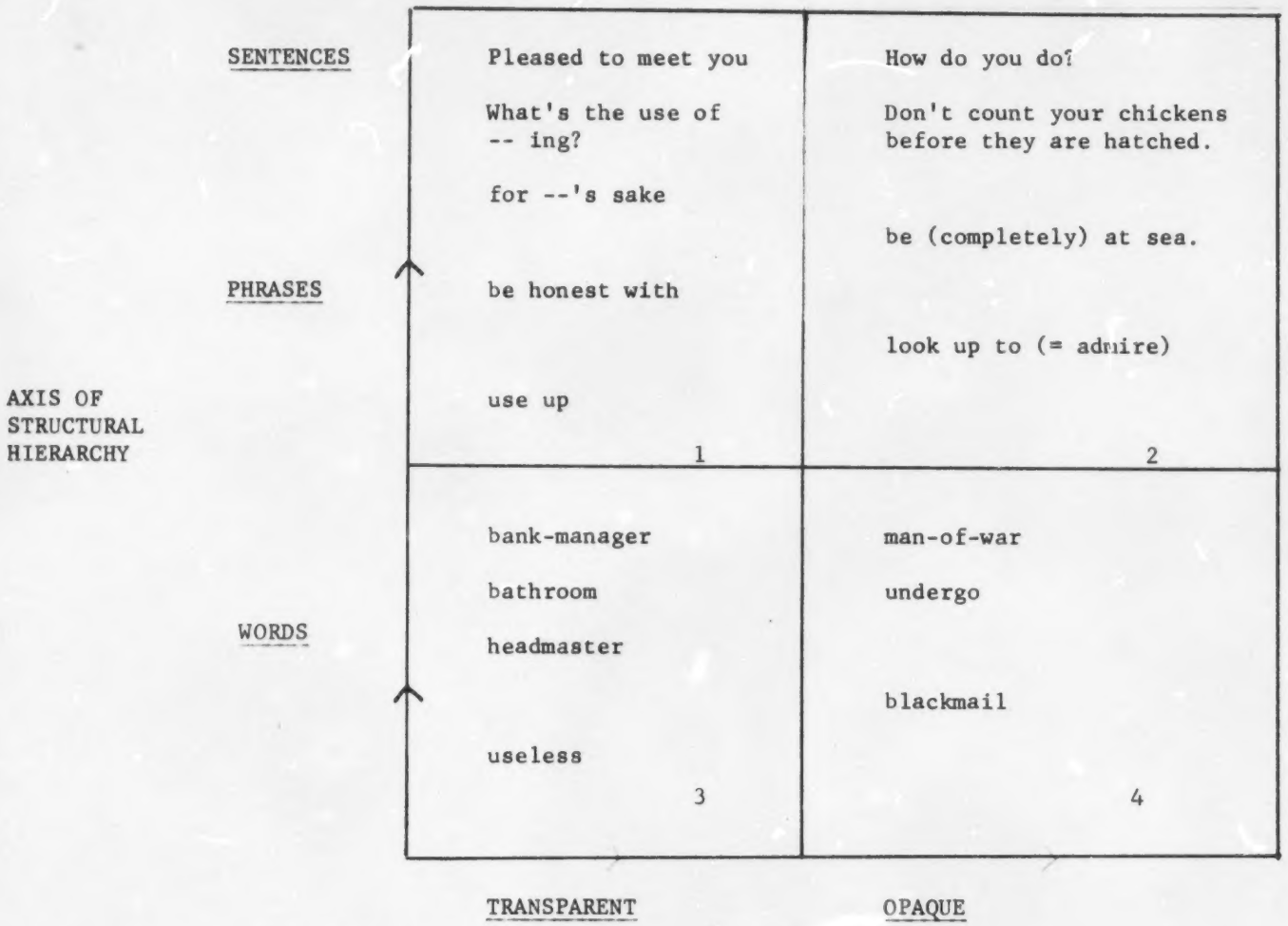

Figure 1. Proposed analysis of possible idiom areas in terms of decodability and structural hierarchy (excluding single-morpheme words and non-stereotyped expressions.)

23. This division enables me to illustrate Makkai's position as in figure 2. In other words, he regards "opaqueness" as the necessary condition for an idiom.

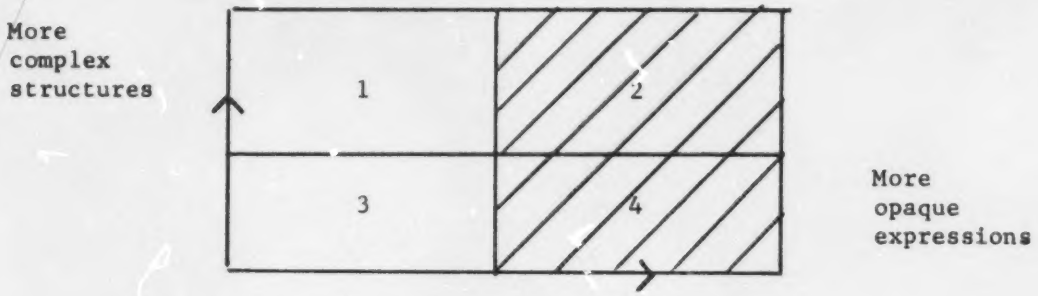

Figure 2: representation of Makkai's classification (idiomatic areas shaded).

24. If on the other hand, we agree with some of the dictionary definitions of idiom, which state that an idiom must be "a succession of words", and further assume that any stereotyped expression is an idiom, then the position is as in figure 3.

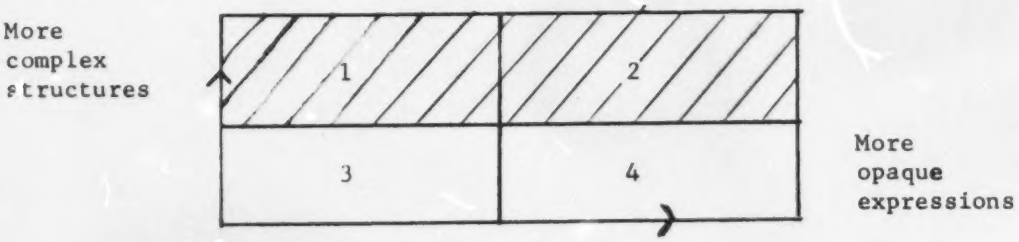

Figure 3: representation of classification according to stereotype above word level (idiomatic areas shaded).

25. Of course, there are other possibilities. Thus we could say that we shall accept only opaque expressions above word level (shading only square 2), or, on the other hand, that we shall exclude only transparent compounds (shading 1, 2 and 4), or indeed that we shall call any expression falling within the four squares "idioms".

26. In such an amorphous area as that of stereotyped expressions, idioms, etc. it would be foolish to be dogmatic. My own inclination is to look at the problem in two stages. My first point is that learners (and teachers) of a language make a distinction between learning a "word" however complex its structure, and learning an "idiom". I would, therefore, like to make a clear division between squares 1 and 2 on the one hand, and 3 and 4 on the other (the situation illustrated in figure 3). Let us call all the expressions that fall into squares 1 and 2 "stereotypes" (as opposed to those in 3 and 4, which are "compounds").

27. Learners are rightly wary of stereotypes for two reasons:

(i) stereotypes must be learned as wholes. If this is not done, it leads to production problems where the choice of a wrong particle, etc. might lead to a meaningless utterance.

(ii) some stereotypes may, in addition, be obscure or misleading, leading to both receptive and productive problems.

28. I would argue that we need one term to cover 1 and 2, since they are both basically covering the same phenomena. But it would in addition be convenient for pedagogical purposes to have labels which can distinguish between 1 and 2. We have already proposed the term "stereotype" as a generic term for the area covered by 1 and 2. "Stereotypes" divide into "transparent stereotypes" (perhaps "fixed collocation" would be a less clumsy expression) and "opaque stereotypes". For this latter category we could use the term "idiom" since it corresponds more closely to the linguistic definitions we have been discussing.

Conclusion: The particular problem which we have been concerned with here is that of matching the "consumer's" expectations to some coherent interpretation of the term "idiom". Recent work in linguistics (especially the definitive work of Adam Makkai, which has been referred to several times in this article) provides a basis for a meta-language in which to discuss the whole

area of idiom. It is now up to applied linguists to apply these findings to their own specific needs.

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